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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMATION UPDATE, FEBRUARY 22 -
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REF: BAGHDAD 569

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, reason 1.4 (b)

11. (S) The effort to oust Ibrahim Jafari from the Prime Ministry is on two tracks. February 21 and February 22 the Kurdish/Allawi/Sunni Arab group began developing the principles from the meeting a month in Kurdistan into a broader government program. This program would be introduced by the Kurds as the basis of a "National Salvation Front" to which the Shia would be invited to join. There was another, quieter meeting February 21 between Kurdish PUKer Barham Salih and SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi aimed at developing a government program to which SCIRI could adhere with the Kurdish-Allawi-Sunni Arab group. It also began discussing the choreography by which SCIRI would drop its support for the Shia Coalition's official prime minister nominee, Ibrahim Jafari. SCIRI wants the biggest payoff they can obtain while paying themselves the smallest price possible in terms of their image as standard-bearer of the Shia Islamist Coalition. Saleh and Abd al-Mahdi are reviewing names for Prime Minister such as Qassim Daoud and Finance Minister Ali Allawi. They will develop a longer list of names in the coming days. They have told the Ambassador that they will widen the discussions to include a top Allawi aide, and an aide to Kurdish President Barzani, along with a representative from the Sunni Arab Islamic Party.

12. (C) On February 22, Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister Rowsh Shaways told PolOffs that the primary obstacle to forming a national unity government is the refusal of the entire Shia Coalition to accept former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and his National Iraqi List as part of the new government. Given Ayatollah Sistani's instructions to both SCIRI's Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and Prime Minister-elect Ibrahim al-Jafari to maintain the unity of the Shia Coalition, Shaways doubted that it would be possible to field an alternate candidate - such as Allawi - for Prime Minister. Shaways thought it would be possible to dump Jafari, however. He ruled out SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi, noting that he would be considered too controversial.

13. (C) Shia independent Qassim Daoud told PolOff February 22 that any attempt to nominate a Prime Minister outside of the Shia Coalition could provoke a Shia uprising in Iraq. He had also heard rumors that an alternate candidate might be nominated if Prime Minister-elect Jafari failed to garner enough support. He expressed bitterness at the result of the internal Shia vote on February 12, stating that deciding a nomination by a margin of

one vote "is not democracy." Daoud sympathized with the difficulties of working in a Jafari government again after the experiences of this past year. As long as the alternate candidate came from within the Shia Coalition, however, Daoud indicated that no one would fight to keep Jafari. He firmly maintained, however, that only the Shia had the right to select the Prime Minister.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador's press remarks on February 20 generated both criticism and praise from political observers. Shia Islamists rejected his call for the security ministries to be non-sectarian as an obvious slam against the SCIRI Interior Minister and thus an indirect call for Sunni Arab extremists to increase their attacks. Kurdish and Allawi List parliamentarians, by contrast, registered strong agreement with the Ambassador.

¶5. (C) President Talabani will host the top political leaders on February 23 to show national unity in the wake of the February 22 attack on the Shia holy mosque in Samarra. A Sadrist told Poloff he was upbeat that the political process would not suffer, since Jafari allegedly had stopped widespread violence between Shia and Sunni Arabs. By contrast, Rowsch Shaways thought the sectarian violence over the bombing in Samarra would only make government formation more difficult.

KHALILZAD